The EU should consider a strategic pause with Moscow to give it time to strengthen its own position.

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In the two decades since the end of the Cold War, Europeans and the EU have struggled to find common ground in their relations with Russia, and generally failed in attempts to promote modernisation. **Jana Kobzova** *argues that it is time for the EU to re-assess its relations with Russia. Instead of hesitating between engagement and containment of its biggest neighbour, Europe should consider a strategic pause to give it time to complete and enforce the rules and policies internally that it would like to see in Russia.*

Since the end of the Cold War, Europeans have been trying to figure out how to deal with their biggest eastern neighbour. Some have hoped that Russia would transform itself into a bigger Poland and argued that Europe should help with building Russia's democratic institutions and market economy. This school of thought has believed that engagement worked better than confrontation with Moscow, Russia's leadership numerous democratic deficits or the bloody campaign in Chechnya notwithstanding. Others, especially after Vladimir Putin came to power in early 2000s have argued that rather than engaged, the official Moscow needs to be contained. In their view, Kremlin's ability to divide and rule the EU or its intolerance of domestic political opposition show that the leadership in Moscow was and remains most interested in its self-preservation. When it comes to its relations with the EU, their argument goes, the Kremlin is interested in reaping personal and economic benefits for the Russian elite and businesses rather than in finding a common ground and crafting a collaborative and mutually-beneficial joint agenda. Seemingly, there is no way out of this dilemma – or is there? Instead of continuing to hesitate between engagement and containment of Russia, the EU should consider a strategic pause with Moscow.

Old dilemmas, less urgent

While the EU continues to agonise over whether it should engage or contain Russia, one thing has changed: the urgency of this dilemma. Against the background of the euro-crisis, upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa or talks on a new trade and investment deal with the US, Russia no longer occupies the minds of the EU's policy-makers as frequently and persistently as it used to. Europeans (and, for that matter, the Americans) simply see very few possibilities for a positive change in today's Russia. The Kremlin's on-going crackdown on political opponents and civil society remains a source of concern. So does Moscow's support for the Syrian regime or the use of its gas deliveries to East European countries dependent on it for political goals. But few of the EU governments see effective or good ways to change Russia's behaviour. Several statements critical of the Russian leadership notwithstanding, the EU currently lacks ideas about how it could pressure Moscow to change the way it treats the domestic NGOs or to win its cooperation on Syria.

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Hope that a new 'partnership for modernisation' between the EU and Moscow, launched in 2010, would gradually transform Russia died when Vladimir Putin returned to the Kremlin in 2012. A confrontational policy seems a poor alternative. Some EU states do not care enough about Moscow's transgressions to risk a quarrel with it; others worry but do not think that a tougher approach would change anything. Paradoxically, this indifference is also due to the fact that those that have feared Russia the most care less these days; the membership of central and eastern states in the EU and NATO has soothed their worries about Moscow's energy security pressure or security threats.

Little hope, big ambitions

Yet despite being less urgent, the EU's offer for Russia remains highly ambitious. On paper, the EU still hopes to create a bloc with its eastern neighbour that would be free of trade and visa barriers and highly integrated in sectors such as energy. Europeans continue to refer to Russia as a 'strategic partner' even though there is little partnership of any kind in evidence: the two sides can merely agree on low-key co-operation in border areas or joint education projects. A more ambitious proposal for a free trade area with Russia remains a distant vision at best. The paradox is that although both sides realise, as the Bertelsmann Foundation's Sustainable Governance Indicators project has found, that "to modernise successfully, Russia needs massive inflows of direct investment, access to advanced technologies and the transfer of managerial practices" (all of which the EU is the most obvious source of) they have failed to convert the idea into policy. European businesses are often put off by Russia's widespread corruption and deficient justice system. Those that persist must be ready to engage within – and endure – Russian market's 'wild West' practices. Moscow seems unwilling to change the system. While a successful anti-corruption drive would attract foreign capital and know-how, it would also threaten the system of patronage and cronyism that has kept Vladimir Putin in power for more than a decade. Given the risks to regime survival, Moscow prefers not to act.

Take a break, do your homework

The time has come for the EU to rethink its relationship with its biggest neighbour. Instead of talking about strategic relations with Moscow, the EU should consider a strategic *pause*. Neither the Europeans nor the Russians need to meet twice a year just to see how little have the numerous common initiatives delivered in practice. While the EU should stick to its ambition to build a free trade zone with Russia, it should also acknowledge that the current Russian leadership is simply not interested. If this is understood, the need to monitor and interpret each minuscule step of the Russian side as a 'step forward' would disappear. The pressure on diplomats and officials to deliver something that could be packaged as 'progress' in the 'strategic partnership' would lessen. Perhaps longer time-

frames would allow both sides to think again about what is it they really want and need from each other.

The EU should use this pause to do its own homework: fully liberalise its energy market, adopt tougher anti-corruption and money-laundering laws, and simplify and unify its Schengen visa issuance system to end the practice of visa-shopping by applicants from abroad, including Russia. The last step would add more pressure on Moscow to finally start fully implementing the commitments it has subscribed to in order to gain a visa-free regime with the EU. For a block that aspires to a unified foreign policy and status of global power, the EU can be terribly divided and self-defeating when it comes to Russia.

If the EU sets and enforces these rules on its home turf, Moscow, thanks to the EU's size, attractiveness and interconnections with Russia, would simply have to abide, be it in the area of visa facilitation or access to the EU's energy market. That does not mean that the Kremlin would change its attitude to the EU overnight; it would still regard it with suspicion and resist reforms that threaten entrenched interests. But the EU can afford to wait – and a European Union that has lessened its gas dependency on Russia and reduced vulnerability to political pressure from Moscow will be far better prepared to engage the country, when and if Moscow changes its mind.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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